

INDIANA BOARD OF TAX REVIEW
Small Claims
Final Determination
Findings and Conclusions

Petitions: 45-003-09-1-5-00288-16
45-003-13-1-5-00335-16
Petitioner: James Nowacki
Respondent: Lake County Assessor
Parcel: 45-08-19-126-004.000-003
Assessment Years: 2009 and 2013

The Indiana Board of Tax Review (“Board”) issues this determination, finding and concluding as follows:

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

1. Nowacki contested the 2009 and 2013 assessments of his property located at 3847 W. 29th Avenue in Gary. The Lake County Property Tax Assessment Board of Appeals (“PTABOA”) issued its determinations valuing the property at \$48,800 for 2009 and \$7,600 for 2013.
2. Nowacki filed Form 131 petitions with the Board and elected to proceed under our small claims procedures. On September 17, 2018, Ellen Yuhan, our designated administrative law judge (“ALJ”), held a hearing on Nowacki’s petitions. Neither she nor the Board inspected the property.
3. Nowacki appeared pro se. The Assessor appeared by Robert W. Metz and Terrance Dourousseau, his Hearing Officers. They were all sworn as witnesses.

RECORD

4. The official record for this matter includes the following: (1) all pleadings, briefs, motions, and documents filed in this appeal; (2) all notices and orders issued by the Board or our ALJ; (3) an audio recording of the hearing; and (4) these Findings and Conclusions.¹

BURDEN OF PROOF

5. Generally, a taxpayer seeking review of an assessing official’s determination has the

¹ Neither party offered any exhibits.

burden of proof. Indiana Code § 6-1.1-15-17.2 creates an exception to that general rule and assigns the burden of proof to the assessor in two circumstances—where the assessment under appeal represents an increase of more than 5% over the prior year’s assessment, or where it is above the level determined in a taxpayer’s successful appeal of the prior year’s assessment. I.C. § 6-1.1-15-17.2(b) and (d).

6. Here, the property’s assessment decreased from 2008 to 2009 and from 2012 to 2013. Nowacki therefore bears the burden of proof for both years.

SUMMARY OF CONTENTIONS

7. Nowacki’s case:
 - a. Nowacki acquired the property at a commissioners’ sale for the minimum bid. Hundreds of people attended the auction but there was no interest in a property like this. The property’s improvement is just one of the many burned out hulks in the area that have collapsed in on themselves and become overgrown. *Nowacki testimony.*
 - b. The property is located in an area experiencing decreasing valuation. Its assessment has come down from \$49,800 in 2008 to \$7,200 in 2015. It has trended down by a significant 20% from 2009 to 2015 and has come down further since then. Nowacki contends the property’s land value should be \$2,800, with no value assigned to the improvements. *Nowacki testimony.*
8. The Assessor’s case:
 - a. The Assessor contends there is no evidence to support a change in the assessments, and he recommends no change. *Durousseau testimony.*

ANALYSIS

9. Nowacki failed to make a prima facie case for reducing the property’s 2009 or 2013 assessments. The Board reached this decision for the following reasons:
 - a. The goal of Indiana’s real property assessment system is to arrive at an assessment reflecting the property’s true tax value. 50 IAC 2.4-1-1(c); 2011 REAL PROPERTY ASSESSMENT MANUAL at 3. “True tax value” does not mean “fair market value” or “the value of the property to the user.” I.C. § 6-1.1-31-6(c), (e). It is instead determined under the rules of the Department of Local Government Finance (“DLGF”). I.C. § 6-1.1- 31-5(a); I.C. § 6-1.1-31-6(f). The DLGF defines “true tax value” as “market value in use,” which it in turn defines as “[t]he market value-in-use of a property for its current use, as reflected by the utility received by the owner or by a similar user, from the property.” MANUAL at 2.

- b. All three standard appraisal approaches—the cost, sales-comparison, and income approaches—are “appropriate for determining true tax value.” MANUAL at 2. In an assessment appeal, parties may offer any evidence relevant to a property’s true tax value, including appraisals prepared in accordance with generally recognized appraisal principles. *Id.* at 3; *see also Eckerling v. Wayne Twp. Ass’r*, 841 N.E.2d 674, 678 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2006) (reiterating that a market value-in-use appraisal that complies with the Uniform Standards of Professional Appraisal Practice is the most effective method for rebutting the presumption that an assessment is correct). Regardless of the appraisal method used, a party must relate its evidence to the relevant valuation date. *Long v. Wayne Twp. Ass’r*, 821 N.E.2d 466, 471 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2005). Otherwise, the evidence lacks probative value. *Id.* The valuation date for the 2009 and 2013 assessments at issue in these appeals was March 1 of each respective assessment year. Ind. Code § 6-1.1-2-1.5(a).
- c. Nowacki contends the property’s improvements are little more than a “burned out hulk” that have no value. He further claims that his land assessment should be \$2,800 for all of the years at issue. However, Nowacki failed to present any probative market-based evidence to support his requested valuation. Statements that are unsupported by probative evidence are conclusory and of no value to the Board in making its determination. *Whitley Products, Inc. v. State Bd. of Tax Comm’rs*, 704 N.E.2d 1113, 1118 (Ind. Tax Ct. 1998).
- d. We also give no weight to his claims regarding the property’s decreasing assessment. Putting aside the fact that the decreasing assessment appears to correspond with his view of the surrounding area as a neighborhood in decline, the Assessor’s decision to decrease the property’s assessment in subsequent years does not prove that its 2009 or 2013 assessments were incorrect. As the Tax Court has explained, “each tax year—and each appeal process—stands alone.” *Fisher v. Carroll Cnty. Ass’r*, 74 N.E. 3d 582 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2017). Evidence of a property’s assessment in one year, therefore, has little bearing on its true tax value in another. *See, e.g., Fleet Supply, Inc. v. State Bd. of Tax Comm’rs*, 747 N.E.2d 645, 650 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2001); *Barth, Inc. v. State Bd. of Tax Comm’rs*, 699 N.E.2d 800, 805 n. 14 (Ind. Tax Ct. 1998).
- e. Because Nowacki offered no probative market-based evidence to demonstrate the property’s correct market value-in-use, he failed to make a prima facie case for a lower assessment. Where a Petitioner has not supported his claim with probative evidence, the Respondent’s duty to support the assessment with substantial evidence is not triggered. *Lacy Diversified Indus. v. Dep’t of Local Gov’t Fin.*, 799 N.E.2d 1215, 1221-1222 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2003).

FINAL DETERMINATION

In accordance with the above findings of fact and conclusions of law, we find for the Assessor and order no change to the property’s 2009 and 2013 assessments.

ISSUED: December 12, 2018

Chairman, Indiana Board of Tax Review

Commissioner, Indiana Board of Tax Review

Commissioner, Indiana Board of Tax Review

- APPEAL RIGHTS -

You may petition for judicial review of this final determination under the provisions of Indiana Code § 6-1.1-15-5 and the Indiana Tax Court's rules. To initiate a proceeding for judicial review you must take the action required not later than forty-five (45) days after the date of this notice.

The Indiana Code is available on the Internet at <<http://www.in.gov/legislative/ic/code>>. The Indiana Tax Court's rules are available at <<http://www.in.gov/judiciary/rules/tax/index.html>>.